John Howard Payne
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A

LETTER

TO THE

GOVERNORS, INSTRUCTORS AND TRUSTEES

OF THE

UNIVERSITIES,

AND

OTHER SEMINARIES OF LEARNING,

IN THE

UNITED STATES,

ON THE

Errors of English Grammars.

By Noah Webster, jun.

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A Letter

To the GOVERNORS, INSTRUCTORS, and TRUSTEES of the UNIVERSITIES, and other SEMINARIES of LEARNING, in the UNITED STATES.

GENTLEMEN,

AS language is the medium of all social intercourse, and the principal instrument by which science, arts and civilization are preserved and propagated, from age to age and from nation to nation, it is of great importance that its general principles should be well understood by those who superintend the education of youth.

IT is of particular importance that the principles and structure of our mother tongue should be clearly defined, and if possible, universally agreed in, by the teachers of our universities, colleges and public schools. Unhappily, the writers on the subject of English Grammar differ most materially from each other, and from the ordinary practice of good speakers. Many of them are men of celebrity, whose names alone are sufficient to give currency to error; and the Americans, like all other people, are strongly inclined to rest their opinions on *authority*.

I HAVE long since laid aside the study of language,

and been a silent spectator of the confidence with which my countrymen adopt, teach and practice certain rules laid down in English Grammars, which I am persuaded are fundamentally erroneous. My attention is called to this subject, at this time, by an opinion advanced by some anonymous critic, in one of the public prints of this city, that the structure of language is founded on the rules of grammar. His words are, "I never understood that the rules of grammar were founded on the structure of language; though I can easily comprehend the structure of language to be founded on the rules of grammar."

When men of such extreme ignorance, and who invert the whole order of the science of languages, substituting authority for principles, and the opinions of grammarians, for the rules on which language is founded, attempt to influence public opinion by their crude notions, it is time to make an effort to guard the American youth against adopting such pernicious and fundamental errors.

It is not to inform, but to awaken the attention, of the learned professors of science in our colleges, that I make a few observations to refute this egregious error; and for the benefit of young persons who may read this letter, and who have never turned their thoughts to the subject.

The truth is, a language is not only formed, but must arrive to a tolerable state of perfection, before a grammar of that language can be constructed. Languages are not formed by philosophers, but by

ignorant barbarians; and as nations advance in knowlege, new words and new combinations of words are added to their language, to express the new ideas which they may acquire.

MEN *speak* before they *write;* and usually hundreds of years have elapsed from the foundation of a nation or state, before the people have had any written language. The formation of language, therefore, is at first the work of necessity and chance; and certain analogies of sound and construction are introduced gradually into language, from a natural or habitual inclination of men towards *uniformity.* Thus the sameness in the terminations of plural nouns and of verbs, has, in every language, been incorporated and become an established part of its construction, hundreds of years before the language has been reduced to writing. Thus, in the languages of the native Indians in America, analogies of this kind exist, and with a good degree of regularity; yet the natives have no grammars nor any knowlege of letters.

THESE analogies are then formed without grammars, and often exist in the *spoken* language of a nation, for a series of ages, before a grammar of that language is framed. These analogies, which are thus formed by barbarians, by a kind of instinctive inclination to sameness and uniformity, become, in later stages of society, when letters are known, the *basis of rules.* The man who composes the first grammar of a language, does not *form* the rules he lays down; but he examins the language itself, as *spoken,* and where he finds an analogy between a number of words, for

instance, in termination, he *adopts* that as a *rule*. Thus the first compiler of an English grammar finding that the names of things, expressing more than one, usually end in *s*, and that names expressing but one individual of that kind, are without *s*, considers this uniformity of termination in names as a *rule*, and lays it down as such. The writer does not frame the analogy—that exists independent of him, and perhaps has existed two thousand years—he only searches out and reduces to order, those principles which practice had previously established.

THUS, in every instance, *grammar is built solely* on the *structure of language*. That which is not found in the *practice of speaking a language*, can have *no place* in a grammar of that language—it must be the *arbitrary dictum* of the compiler and of *no authority*.

I HAVE thought it necessary to say this much, on a mistake which appears to be material. Grammars are made to show the student what a language *is*—not, how it *ought to be*. They are compiled for boys, in schools, rather than for men of science, who ought to quit grammars which are the *streams*, and mount to the *source* of knowlege, the genuine construction of the language itself.

As grammar is the study of youth, many of whom can never go further in their researches, it ought to be *correct*; that is, it should give a compendious account of what the language *is*—the rules should not only be short and clear, but *just*, exhibiting its genuine construction.

This leads me to the direct object of this communication; which is, to call the attention of the literati of this country, and especially of the instructors of youth, to certain rules laid down by English grammarians, which I suppose not warranted by *use* nor by *construction*.

Of these I shall first notice the rules laid down by Bishop Lowth, respecting the use of the subjunctive mode, which are these:—"When an action is subjoined as the end or design, or mentioned under a condition, a supposition or the like, for the most part depending on some other verb, and having a conjunction before it, it is called the subjunctive, as, if I love, if thou love."—"The several expressions of conditional will, possibility, liberty, obligation, &c. come all under the subjunctive mode. It is their conditionality, their being subsequent and depending on something preceding, that determins them to be the subjunctive mode. Hypothetical, conditional, concessive and exceptive conjunctions, seem in general to require the subjunctive mode after them." Such are the principles laid down by this celebrated writer, with regard to the use of the subjunctive mode.

The first example to illustrate his principles, is in the passage in Matthew, iv. 3. "If thou *be* the son of God." This however is a most unfortunate example; for the original Greek is in the indicative, *ei;* "if thou *art* the son of God," is the literal translation and sense of the passage.—And this is precisely the manner in which the unlettered people of our country, who follow our customary modes of speak-

ing, would express the same ideas. It requires no small labor in a teacher, with the authority of rules, to lead astray a genuine English descendant, into the unnatural use of *be* instead of *art*. In common parlance, *am*, *art* and *is*, after *if*, are used to express doubt and conditionality, precisely according to Lowth's idea of the use of the subjunctive mode. So the indicative also was used in Greek and Latin—and so is it used in French.

The next example cited by Lowth in proof of his principles, is, the passage from Job, xiii. 15. "Though he *slay* me, yet will I put my trust in him." This is equally unfortunate for him; for the verb *slay* is in the future tense, "though he shall slay me." This is obvious from the sense, from the succeeding part of the sentence, and from the original which is in the future. In the Greek and Latin, the idea would be expressed in no other tense than the future; and the English, not having any distinct form of future tense in the subjunctive, must make use of the indicative. I shall hereafter demonstrate that this is according to the true original structure of our language.

The third example is from Lev. xxii. 6. "Unless he *wash* his flesh." This is also in the future time; "unless he *shall* wash," and in all similar phrases, the verbs in the ancient languages are in the future tense. The whole error of Lowth on this point, is, that he has not distinguished between an action of *present* doubtfulness or uncertainty, and one to be performed hereafter. "Whether he *is* there

or not, I cannot tell"—"Whether he *be* there or not, I cannot tell," are the two forms of expression in controversy. I maintain the first to be the correct form of doubt or uncertainty, because it is universal custom in our *spoken* language. The other form is sometimes found in books, especially ancient authors, but is obsolete in practice, and is not to be vindicated, except as an elliptical form of the future tense, "Whether he *will be* there or not, I cannot tell."

NOR is the next example more to the author's purpose. "Thou couldst have no power over me, except it were given from above." John xix. 11. Here the translators have taken the liberty to deviate materially from the modes and the sense of the original, in which both the verbs are in the indicative. The literal translation is, "Thou *hast* no power against me, unless it *was* given to thee from above." The translators have taken, what I conceive, an improper liberty, not only with the language, but with the sense; for instead of giving the simple *assertions* of the original, they have added the idea of *power* or *possibility*. Instead of saying "thou hast no power," they say, "thou couldst have no power," thus turning a *declaratory* phrase into a *conditional* one. The sense of their translation may be *true*, but it is not in strict conformity with the original.

NOR does the conjunction *whether* require the subjunctive mode. The example cited by the author from 1. Cor. xv. 11. "whether it *were* I or they," is no authority, for the verb in the original is omitted; "whether I or they."

But in John vii. 17. we have an instance in point. "If any man will do his will, he shall know of his doctrine, *whether* it *be* of God or whether I speak of myself." Here also the translators have changed the mode—the original is *estin*, "whether it *is*" of God. And in 1. John, iv. 1. the translators themselves have used the indicative in a similar phrase. "Try the spirits, *whether* they *are* of God." This is correct, agreeable to the original, and to universal practice in our language, among the intelligent part of our citizens, who have not been led astray by grammar rules.

The word *except*, which, Lowth says, usually requires the subjunctive mode, is in fact followed almost invariably by the Greek aorist; rarely by the present of the subjunctive. Matt. v. 20. "Except your righteousness *shall exceed* that of the Scribes and Pharisees." Here the translation is correct; but had the *shall* been omitted, as it might have been with strict propriety, Lowth and his followers would have arranged the verb in the *present tense* of the subjunctive. "Except or unless your righteousness *exceed*." This shows the rule to be fundamentally erroneous; for *exceed*, in this instance, would be in the future tense.

Matthew xii. 29. "Except he first *bind* the strong man." Here is the same tense in the original as in the former example; but the translators have omitted *shall*. This omission, however, cannot convert a future or an aorist of the Greek into the present tense in English. Matt. xviii. 3. "Except ye

be converted"—xxiv. 22. "Except those days *shall be* shortened." In both these passages, the Evangelist has employed an aorist—the sense in both, as to time, is the same; yet the translation in one passage has the sign of the future, *shall*, and in the other it is omitted. Notwithstanding this omission, both verbs are in the future tense in English, and so they ought to be arranged in grammar. Lowth's arrangement is productive of error and confusion.

The word *though* never requires the subjunctive mode. It has been already remarked, that, in the example cited by Lowth, "though he slay me," the verb is in the future tense. The same is true of many of the verbs following that word; probably *all* that follow it are in the present tense of the indicative, or the future tense, or an aorist in Greek. 2. Cor. iv. 16. "Though our outward man *perish*." In the original, the verb, translated *perish*, is in the present tense of the indicative. It signifies to corrupt or decay; and the sense seems to be, "though our outward part *is decaying* or *is perishing*, yet our inward man is renewed daily." Here the action is *not* future, but evidently of that continued and unfinished kind, denoted in English by the verb *be*, and a participle, *is perishing*. The translation, therefore, is incorrect.

2. Cor. xii. 11. "In nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I *be* nothing." Here is one among a multitude of examples in which the translation of the bible, which Lowth avers to be the best model of correct language, does not maintain that author's rules. In the original, ei kai ouden eimi,

signifies "though I *am* nothing." There is no doubt, condition or uncertainty, to require the subjunctive mode, for the Apostle admits that he is nothing; and the verb therefore ought to be, in English as it is in Greek, in the indicative—this upon Lowth's own principles.

COLL. ii. 5. "For though I *be* absent from the flesh, yet I *am* with you in the spirit." This translation is liable to the same objection as the foregoing. Here is no condition or doubt; the verbs, in the original, are both in the indicative—apeimi & eimi—and what could justify the translators in changing the mode? *am* ought to be used in both parts of the sentence.

"THOUGH he *were* a son, yet learned he obedience," Lowth admits to be wrong; it ought to be *was*, as in the following passage,—"Though he *was* rich, yet for our sakes he became poor," which is correct, and admitted by Lowth to be so, because the fact expressed is not doubted. "The proper use then, says Lowth, of the subjunctive mode after the conjunction, is in the case of a doubtful supposition or concession, as in Psalms xxxvii. 24. "*Though* he *fall*, he shall not be utterly cast down." Now in truth there is no other "doubtful supposition" in this passage than this—the action is spoken of as a *future* contingency, which is expressed properly in the indicative, with the aid of *shall* or *should*. This is the source of Lowth's error. He evidently did not compare this form of the *verb*, which he calls *subjunctive*, and which occurs so frequently in the vulgar

version of the bible, with the original languages, in which the verb is almost uniformly in the future, and which the sense requires to be in that tense, in English.

With respect to the conjunction *if*, where is the good English writer or speaker that uses the subjunctive form after it? Where is the example in Greek, Latin, or French? Or rather, where is this conjunction *not* followed with a verb in the *indicative?*—Throughout the whole New Testament the indicative mode follows, almost invariably, the Greek conjunction *ei*, which is translated *if*, and without any regard to the distinctions mentioned by Lowth. Indeed, I cannot find an exception.

No distinction is observed in the Greek, except that which I have explained, viz. present tense and future. If the action spoken of is *present*, or refers to existence in general, without regard to time, the Greek language uses the indicative, present tense, and that, whether the fact is admitted or doubtful. If the action spoken of is considered as future, the verb is in the future tense, or an aorist. In very few instances indeed, is the present tense of the subjunctive used, unless in cases where the English would be obliged to employ *may*, *can*, or other auxiliary.

Matt. vii. 10. "If he *ask* a fish," is not the present tense of the subjunctive mode; it is the future tense. "If thy brother *trespass* against thee"—"If thy brother *be* grieved with thy meat"—These verbs are in the future tense, and so they are in Greek:—"If he *shall* ask"—if thy brother *shall* trespass," &c.

But in these passages—"If any man *love* not the Lord Jesus Christ"—"If any man *think* himself a prophet"—"If any man *be* ignorant, let him be ignorant still,"—the action is spoken of as present, and the *verbs* in the original are *all* in the *present tense* of the *indicative mode*—and so ought to have been the translation, according to the best practice of English speakers.

If we look into the Roman classics, we find the same facts to overthrow Lowth's rules. Rarely or never did Cicero use the subjunctive after *si*. De Natura Deorum, Lib. i. 2. "Quorum si vera sententia *est*," not *sit*; if the doctrine of those men *is* true.

"Et, si omnia philosophiæ præcepta *referuntur* ad vitam"—"*Si* liber Antiochi nostri vera *loquitur*"—"*Si* videtur"—*Si* mundus nullus *erat*;" and so almost invariably. In these and other examples, Cicero uses the indicative to express doubt or supposition, directly contrary to Lowth's rule.

The same author uses the indicative after other conjunctions: "Sin autem Dî neque *possunt* nos juvare nec volunt"—"*Nisi* molestum *est*, repete, quæ coeperas"—"*Quamquam* non mihi, sed tibi hic *venit* adjutor." Lib. i. 7. And this whether the action is spoken of as doubtful or certain.

And here it is proper to observe, since I have a Latin classic before me as an authority, that the subjunctive mode in the Greek and Roman languages was used to answer the same purposes as our auxili-

ary verbs. Thus Cicero—"Quasi aër sine ulla forma Deus esse *possit*." As if the air without any form *could be* God. Or,

The subjunctive mode was used as following or dependent on another verb, as "Ita fit, ut Deus ille, quem mente noscimus, nusquam prorsus *appareat*." Lib. i. 15. But in English this rule is totally unknown; one verb has no government of another verb in this manner, unless in some obsolete phrases the imperative may be said to require the subjunctive mode. In general it is the established practice, that verbs following other verbs are in the indicative; and so is the translation of the foregoing sentence from Cicero. "So it happens that this God, whom we know mentally, *has* no appearance, or *does* not appear at last." In English the subjunctive mode in such cases would be nonsense.

In the French language, the indicative mode is used also after conjunctions expressing doubt or supposition. *S'il est*, if he is, if it is, is the invariable mode of expression, (never *s'il soit*) si Je suis, si vous etes, &c.

In our own language, the evidence against Lowth's rule is still stronger. We find in old authors, and indeed in many modern ones, the subjunctive mode as well as the indicative, after conjunctions, and this without any regard to the distinctions laid down by Lowth. But I maintain, that by the construction of our language, no subjunctive mode is necessary—in most cases it is improper—and what is

the strongest of all arguments, *it is not used in the spoken language*, which is the only true foundation of grammar. As a general remark, this is strictly true. There must however be excepted, many men of science who learn by *grammar*, to use the subjunctive form of the verb; but neither in England nor in the United States, do the genuine descendants of the Anglo-Saxons, who learn the language traditionally, ever use that mode. Of my own countrymen I speak from personal knowlege—and I take the best English writers as my authorities for the assertion as it respects the English.

Of all the English writers, Addison stands first for writing the language with natural, unaffected ease. The reason is, he wrote the language, just as it was *spoken*, in his age, by intelligent well-bred men, unfettered by the rules of dogmatical Grammarians. The age of Addison, Pope, Swift, Steele, and Arbuthnot has often been called the *Augustan* age of English literature; and justly; for though the nation has produced many eminent writers since, and many improvements have been made in particular sciences, yet the taste of the nation for fine writing, either in prose or verse, has not improved, but rather degenerated.

We may therefore take the language of Addison's age, as the best model of true English. Now, it is remarkable that Addison rarely uses the subjunctive mode; but mostly the indicative, after the conjunctions. Steele, one of the authors of the Spectator, but much inferior to Addison, uses the subjunctive

very often; and this, among other reasons, gives his style an air of stiffness and formality, which lessens very much the pleasure of reading his papers.

Spectator, No. 106. "On the contrary, if he *coughs* or *betrays* any infirmities of old age, it is easy for a by-stander to observe a secret concern in the looks of all his servants." How stiff and even ridiculous would this sentence appear, if the subjunctive mode had been used, *if he cough!* Yet this is precisely the manner in which the followers of Lowth, and especially Scotch authors, now write the language.

No. 93. "Florella desires to know *if* there *are* any books written against prudes, and intreats me, *if* there *are*, to give them a place in my library." No. 94. "And *if* our notion of time *is* produced." No. 101. "*If* men of eminence *are* exposed to censure on one hand, they are as much liable to flattery on the other." No. 206. His clothes please him, *if* they *are* fashionable and warm; his companions are agreeable, *if* they *are* civil and well-bred." No. 225. "*Though* a man *has* all other perfections and wants discretion, he will be of no great consequence in the world; but *if* he *has* this single talent in perfection, he may do what he pleases."—Such is the language of Addison—Such was, in that age, and such is, at this time, the language of the English nation.

The truth relating to this subject is, that the early English writers had no fixed and regular practice; and the rules of the language appear not to have been digested into any system. More than four centuries

ago, Trevisa, who wrote the English of the age, used the indicative mode, after conjunctions. The language was then in a rude state; it had been driven almost wholly from good company, by the Norman conquest, and the fashionable predilection for the French; but what renders it impossible for us to know what was then the most prevailing form of verbs in use, is, that the Anglo-Saxon was divided into *three* dialects, according to the testimony of Higden, viz. the northern language, spoken in Northumberland and Yorkshire—the middle, spoken in Mercia, or the middle counties—and the language spoken in the southern counties. The northern and southern dialects were so different as to be scarcely intelligible to persons not natives of the north or south. There were then, so to speak, three distinct languages spoken in England; and out of these three has been formed the present English language.

CHAUCER used the subjunctive mode after the conjunction, *if*—Trevisa did not—these writers might have written different dialects, both of which were *correct at that time.* Both have been followed in subsequent ages, and the varieties in the use of the indicative and subjunctive modes for four hundred years, may thus be traced back to distinct dialects. To the same cause we are to attribute the use of two substantive verbs, or rather three, in our language—*be*, *were* and *am*—*be* from the German, *beon*; *were* from *weorthan*, and *am* from the Greek and Latin, *eimi* and *sum*, which are radically the same word.

THE verb *be* strictly belongs to the indicative mode.

We derive the use of it from the German, in which language, it is the indicative, Ich bin, I be. The best writers of the 16th and 17th centuries, Ben Johnson, Spenser, Shakspear and others used it in the indicative—and the practice, tho obsolete in books, is still observable among the true descendants of the Saxons, in England and America. *I be, we be, they be,* in the indicative mode, are still good English, tho considered vulgar. And it is for *this reason*, viz. that the word is in the indicative mode, that *if I be, if we be,* are ever good English, in the present tense. From not attending to this circumstance, that *be* is really the indicative form of the verb, writers have been led to throw these expressions, *if I be, if we be,* into the subjunctive mode.

But this use of *be* in the indicative, tho retained in vulgar practice, is become so far obsolete, as to deserve no countenance. It is not heard in the practice of well-bred men, who are not under the influence of local habits, nor governed by learned pedantry.—Whether with a conjunction or without one, the indicative form of the verb is most generally used, in this age. It is more correct and more agreeable to the ear.

What was the precise mode of using the verbs in common parlance, two or three hundred years ago, we have not now the means of knowing with certainty. It is presumeable that there has always been, what we now observe, some difference between the written and spoken language: but one thing is clear, that if books have recorded the spoken language of

three or four centuries past, the practice has undergone most material alterations, in respect to the use of verbs after conjunctions; for it is a most obvious fact, that the English and American people, as a body, do not, in speaking, use the subjunctive mode at all. The use of that mode is confined solely to men who learn the language by books.

This circumstance alone ought to decide the point in discussion; for if there is no subjunctive mode used in the *general* and *usual practice of speaking*, there *ought to be no such mode in books*, and in propriety, there *can* be none; nor has any man a right to construct a grammar on the principle of such a form of the verb, when the form is not used in the spoken language.—When a particular form or use of words ceases to be *current* in practice, it ceases to be a part of the living language, and ought to stand in grammars as *obsolete*, merely to explain the old practice. It becomes a *dead language*, like the Greek or Roman, and is preserved for the sake of antiquity, as we preserve ancient coins, to explain passages of history.

It is a very unfortunate thing for our language, that the most eminent writers on the subject, have not attended to these principles. Instead of teaching what *is* the real, genuine language, at the time of writing, authors have struggled to preserve the *old* rules of practice; by this means, instead of assisting to preserve an agreement between books and practice, they have contributed very much to create and perpetuate differences between the written and spoken language. They have done the same in the orthography; and

from a strange perversion of the obvious rules of propriety, while the pronunciation must, from the nature of man and society, be changing, authors have taken unwearied pain to *fix* the orthography: and this principle has been so pertinaciously pursued, that there is, in a considerable portion of our language, no more alliance between the orthography and pronunciation, than between the spelling of Greek words and the sounds of English ones.

In all living languages, changes in moral and political circumstances and improvements in science, require, and will certainly introduce, gradual correspondent changes in the sounds of words and the structure of the parts of speech. The sounds and forms introduced by these changes, when generally adopted, are *legitimate parts* of the language; and whatever is omitted, is no longer of any practical use, nor is it to be considered as a part of the current language. Hence all *changes in sounds* ought to be immediately designated by *changes in orthography;* and *changes in construction* ought to be observed in a digest of grammar rules. Thus, changes in practice, which are slowly progressive, will be accompanied with gradual alterations in books: and books and practice, instead of endless clashing and contradictions, will assist each other in preserving uniformities.

Had the first compilers of English Grammars been acquainted with the original structure of the language, they would have perceived that no subjunctive mode is necessary. Unfortunately, this subject was never understood till the present age, and the

honor of the discovery is entirely due to Mr. John Horne Tooke. This seems to be admitted by the compilers of the Encyclopedice. See Dobson's edition—Article, *Grammar*. Bishop Lowth had no idea of the true principles on which the language is built; nor had Dr. Johnson; tho both were men of the highest reputation for erudition. Dr. Johnson, a short time before his death, declared that if he was to publish another edition of his dictionary, he would introduce a number of Tooke's etymologies. This fact is stated in the European Magazine, if I mistake not, for 1784; but the work is not before me.

Mr. Tooke is unpopular in England with the court and the most influential part of the nation; and this circumstance has operated against the progress of his principles: but I have investigated the subject, by the help of such old authors as have fallen in my way; and from my own knowlege, can affirm his system in general to be well founded. By *his* system, I mean *his explanation* of the structure of the parts of speech in English. It is not *his* system, for the principles are found in the language itself; but the discovery and explanation are due solely to his researches.

By tracing the language into antiquity, this author has discovered that our conjunctions are verbs in the imperative mode, and that other particles are nouns, or other principal parts of speech. By this discovery, it is made evident that all compound sentences are resolvable into simple ones, and that no such part of speech as a conjunction is necessary; and on original principles this circumstance would render

a subjunctive mode unnecessary at least, and so far as we can judge, improper: for example—"If my horse is not lame, I will ride." The word *if* is known for certainty to be a contraction from *give*, as four centuries ago it was generally written *gif* or *yeve*, the imperative mode. The foregoing sentence then consists of three distinct affirmations:—"Give; my horse is not lame; I will ride." This is no fancy of mine or of Mr. Tooke. It is the *fact;* such is the original structure of the sentence. The first word *give* is a verb in the imperative mode—the following words, *my horse is not lame*, stand as the accusative or objective case after *give*, according to a well known rule, that a member of a sentence may be the nominative or objective. This is precisely the artificial manner contrived by the authors of our language to express a *condition*. And it is proved beyond controversy, that all the conditions, doubts and hypotheses mentioned by Lowth as being in the subjunctive mode, are forms of words resolvable into separate independent *affirmations* in the indicative and imperative modes. "My horse is not lame—give that—admit that—I will ride." Such is the true structure of the sentence. But let the first verb be put into the subjunctive form—"My horse be lame—give that—I will ride," and the absurdity of using the subjunctive becomes obvious.

This form of the substantive verb however is less disgusting than the subjunctive form of other verbs, If he have, if he come, if he say—Where is the nation or the part of the nation, in whose practice these expressions are heard? Where is the ear, accustomed to real English, which is not displeased with this awk-

ward form of the verb? Do we ever hear such language, except from men who are taught it by books? And are not students in our colleges and schools put to great difficulty to break their habits of using the more easy and familiar mode, the indicative? Do not most of them lose the use of the subjunctive, soon after leaving college, and mingle with the world, and relapse again into the common practice of their countrymen? And do not those who attempt to observe their grammar rules always appear formal and singular?

I THINK it much to be regretted, that the great Lowth has advanced the rules above mentioned in regard to the use of the subjunctive mode. It is much to be regretted that he and Dr. Johnson, whose names alone are powerful authorities, had not become acquainted with the etymological discoveries of Mr. Tooke; for I am persuaded they would have corrected their grammatical principles.

As the rules of English grammar now stand and are studied in our public seminaries, they tend to introduce and to confirm a most material difference between the practice of our nation in speaking and in books. The Scotch writers, who are deservedly ranked among the most eminent of this age, attempt to follow these grammar rules, and thus give their writings a harsh and formal construction of periods, which greatly lessens its ease and fluency.

THERE is not the least occasion for a distinct termination in the subjunctive mode in the English lan-

guage. The advocates for that mode use one tense only in regular verbs, the *present;* and two in the verb, *be*, the *present* and *imperfect:* but in this distribution there is not the least use; the indicative mode answering every purpose. The uses of the subjunctive mode in Latin, are completely answered by the English auxiliaries.

CAVE *ne pereat*, would have formerly been translated, "Take care that he or it *do* not perish:" but this language is wholly obsolete; and the universal practice now is, "Take care that he *does* not perish." This common practice is also correct on Tooke's principles. "He does not perish—take care that—". In this manner the only tense used in the subjunctive mode with a distinct termination, is gone into disuse in speaking, and in one age more will be known only in old books.

AGAIN—The English grammars lay it down as a rule, that as the pronoun *you* was originally plural, it ought to be followed by a plural verb; though refering to a single person. This is not correct; for the moment the word is generally used to denote an individual, it is to be considered as a pronoun in the singular number; the following verb should be regulated by that circumstance, and considered as in the singular. Thus, "you have," applied to a single person, are in the singular, and properly arranged in that number, in grammars. Indeed, in the substantive verb, the word has taken the singular form of the verb, *you was*, which practice is getting the better of old rules, and probably will be established.

Another fault in modern books is the use of adverbs instead of adjectives, in such expressions as these —"Agreeably to order; independently of this consideration." This is another example in which *vulgar prattle* is more correct than *learned rules*. Common people say—"Agreeable to my promise, I send you a sample."—"Previous to this, he was discharged." The learned who sought for a grammar rule to explain these forms of expressions, and could not find it, concluded there must be a noun for the adjective to agree with, or the expression must be faulty; and as the noun was not obvious, they changed the adjective into an adverb, in the face of universal practice, and to the utter destruction of the ease and melody of expression. They never reflected that the participle *according*, from accord, had been for centuries used, in these expressions, in its adjective form; and that to be consistent they must convert that word into *accordingly*—as, "accordingly to order." No, they arranged this word among the prepositions, and thus saved their consciences.

The truth is, our language is all resolvable into distinct sentences, and the most common principles in its structure, the *agreement of adjectives with sentences*, and the *government of sentences* by *verbs*, have been almost totally overlooked. The following examples will illustrate my meaning, and justify the vulgar use of the adjective in the foregoing sentences. "Agreeable to order, the house went into a committee of the whole." To discover what the adjective *agreeable* refers to, we ask the question, what was agreeable to order? The answer is, the house forming into a committee of the

whole—the whole declaration—was agreeable to order. This example will explain, on the true principles of our language, every similar phrase.* And this principle, the agreement of adjectives with sentences, is one of the most common in the language. Thus the word *that* is always an adjective; never a conjunction. It has two relations only, as far as regards construction—it relates to a noun or to a sentence: To a noun, as *that book*—to a sentence, as "tell him that he must not go." By inverting the order of these words, we understand the true sense and force of *that*. "He must not go—tell him that." *That* here refers to, or as grammarians say, *agrees with* the whole member of the sentence.

THIS developement of the principles of the English language, is a recent thing; but very important, as it proves a number of the rules laid down by the great Johnson and Lowth, to be without any foundation in the language itself.

ANOTHER remarkable instance of the force of authority, is seen in a late change of practice, in writing *contemporary* for *cotemporary*. Some late critic, in his great wisdom, laid down a general rule, that *con* ought

* WHAT will modern fine writers do with the following: "The assertion is taken for granted, not only without proof, but *contrary* to numerous facts." What is *contrary* to facts? *Contrary* does not agree with *assertion*, nor any other noun or single word. On the principles of the advocates for "*agreeably to order*," it ought to be *contrarily* to numerous facts—a phrase which I am sure no man will attempt to defend. *Contrary* is good English, referring to the whole of the first member of the sentence.

to be used before consonants and *co* before vowels. The truth is, the practice should be guided by the ease of pronunciation. *Cotemporary* was formerly used; it is more easy for the tongue and more pleasant to the ear, and therefore ought to be continued in use.

Another remarkable error in the use of the words *dare* and *need*, has been introduced by Dr. Johnson. This learned writer observed, that in common practice these words are often used in the third person singular, without the personal termination, "he dare not go"—he need not come." Without examining the established manner of using these words, in all their varieties, he concluded the use of them in the third person without the usual termination, to be a vulgar error; and in some of his writings, as his Lives of the Poets, he has added the personal ending, "he dares not go"—he needs not come;" expressions as disgusting and as incorrect, as "he cans not go, or wills not come."

Had this author taken pains to examin all the uses of these words, he would have found that they have two distinct forms, one, as auxiliary verbs, in the manner we use *can*, *will*, and *may*; and the other, as principal verbs with regular terminations. When used as principal verbs, they admit the objective case after them and the infinitive mode; as, I dare him to walk with me—he *dares* me to walk—he *needs* improvement—he *needs to be* corrected. But as auxiliary verbs, they are used, and elegantly, without the termination. *He dares not go*, and *he dare me to walk with him*, are equally bad English. These distinctions

are as well established in books and practice, as any rules in the language. This innovation of Dr. Johnson is another proof that great men often overlook the most obvious things, and that nothing is more dangerous than the errors of great men, because their opinions are received by the world as good authority, without an inquiry into the grounds of those opinions.

Lowth thinks that *whose*, the genitive of *who*, is improperly applied to *things*—another proof that he did not know the derivation of the word. The relative *who*, in all its cases, is the Latin *qui*, descended to us thro the Teutonic language, as are hundreds of other English words; qui, who, quod, what, quem, whom, cujus, whose, &c. Had Lowth examined the old Scotch books, he could not have overlooked this fact, for in them the words are spelt quha, quhat, &c. *Whose* therefore is and has been from the earliest ages, of *all* genders; it is merely *cujus*; and so it was used in speaking and writing, till Lowth attempted to alter it, because he did not understand its derivation.

In a similar manner the *learned* have attempted to change the vulgar pronunciation of *lēst*, into lĕst—from long to short e. The truth is, the vulgar are right—the word is the participle of *lease*, tho called a conjunction; it has the sense of *leased* to this day, and no other sense, and ought to have no other pronunciation. Lowth observes that it might be spelt with *a*, *least*; "for distinction's sake." This might be the best reason he could assign; but the true reason is, its derivation from *lease*.

THESE are but a few of the multitude of errors which *learned* men have introduced into our language, by attempts to correct common practice, because they have not understood the grounds of it.

I WILL even venture to assert, that two thirds of all the corruptions in our language have been introduced by *learned grammarians*, who, from a species of pedantry acquired in schools, and from a real ignorance of the original principles of the English tongue, have been, for ages, attempting to correct what they have supposed, *vulgar errors*, but which are in fact *established analogies*.

THAT men of profound erudition should overlook plain principles and facts, is a thing not uncommon. It is an unquestionable fact, that all the English antiquarians and critics have overlooked the true meaning of the name of the legislature of the nation, *parliament;* and that to this moment, no man in the nation knows its etymology or primitive signification. Lord Coke derived the word from the word *parler*, to speak, and an old French word, denoting mind; because, in that assembly, men *spoke their minds;* and strange as it may seem, this miserable etymology passed for ages unquestioned. The learned and elegant Hargrave has rejected the last part of the derivation; but appears to know as little as his author, the true etymology.

IN like manner, the meaning of the word *peer*, in the house of peers, has escaped all the writers on the history of the parliament. It is still supposed to be derived from the Latin *par*, equal; and the house of Lords is therefore a *house of equals*.

If it was impossible to find the true etymology of these words, men of sense ought to reject the common one, because a single reflection will make it appear trifling, puerile and absurd: but when a little investigation into antiquity discloses the existence of words from which to derive *parliament* and *peer*, in perfect accordance with propriety, it is scarcely possible to conceive how such prominent words should have remained to this day unexplained. The simple truth is, parliament is from two old Teutonic, German or Saxon words *par* or *bar*, a baron or proprietor of lands, and *mote*, meeting, or *le mote*, the meeting—*the meeting of barons*, is the signification of the word. *Peer* is from the same source, the *house of peers*, *pares*, is the *house of barons*, who, under the feudal system, were the only proprietors of land. *Paramount*, was the *peer above other peers*. Lord Paramount, was the *Lord Proprietor* of lands above others. Primus inter pares—the *first among the barons*.

This explanation of the words is not merely curious, but very useful; and there are some points in the history of English jurisprudence, which cannot be explained on any other principles. See the subject discussed at large in my Essays.

I have mentioned these words solely to show how men of great erudition may make mistakes; and how powerful is the force of character in giving currency to error. Perhaps it is proper also to remark that the English, as a nation, are very prone to follow authorities and precedents; and from a pride which is very natural to a great, a learned and powerful nation, they

are perhaps too apt to hold in contempt the opinions, on this side of the Atlantic, which call their authorities in question.

One article more and I shall close this Letter :

It is often remarked what a vast difference there is between the debates of the British Parliament and of the American Congress, as they appear in print, with respect to correctness and elegance of diction. The inferiority of the American language of debate, is not to be attributed so much to the speakers, as to the person who takes down the debates.

One principal reason why the British debates appear more correct than the American, is, that in all important arguments, the stenographer throws the language into the *present tense ;* thus the words as printed represent the speaker in the act of pronouncing. This has a happy effect not only in transporting the reader's mind to the place and time of speaking, but in rendering the language correct, and preventing a confusion of tenses.

But this rule is not observed in the British printed debates, except in the more important speeches, and we see in them as in our printed debates, a monstrous jumble of tenses—sometimes representing the speaker, and sometimes the writer or narrator. The following examples will illustrate these ideas :—

Debate on Ways and Means, House of Commons, Dec. 1796.—" Mr. Grey said, that at a time when the enormous burthens with which the country

was already loaded, *required* the utmost vigilance and caution, which the representatives of the people *could* exercise, and when so great an additional weight *was* to be imposed, he hoped the House would recollect the important duties which their situation, as guardians of the public purse, *called* upon them to discharge."

HERE the verbs marked denote past time, whereas the ideas affirmed regard *present* time. They were not only true, at the *time of speaking*, but they refer to a general state of facts in existence at the *time of writing also*. The sentence should run thus:

"MR. GREY *said*, that at a time when the enormous burthens with which the country *is* already loaded, *require* the utmost vigilance which the representatives *can* exercise, and when an additional weight *is* to be imposed, he *hoped* the house would recollect the important duties which their situation *calls* upon them to discharge."

AGAIN—"The Chancellor of the Exchequer said, he was ready to admit that the exports and imports *were* not very correct; they *were*, however, as correct *now*, as they *were* on former occasions."

So in the debates of Congress—"If gentlemen *were* afraid of speculation"—"He wished to know whether in those books there *was* an account of the sums due to these claimants"—"It was answered there was"—"If the members of that house *were* ignorant of the law"—"All limitation laws, he said, *were* contrary to justice."—In all such sentences, the

fault is in the narrator. The speaker uses the present tense, and the writer or narrator should use the same tense, wherever the thing affirmed is indefinite in time, and exists or is true at the time of writing, as well as of speaking. "All limitation laws, he said, *are* contrary to justice."

SUPPOSE a man to be relating a debate on the perfections of the Deity, and use such language as this—"Mr. A. B. said, God *was* just—he *was* the wise disposer of events;" every man would perceive the impropriety. Wherever the time is indefinite, and the affirmation is of a thing which exists generally at one time as well as another, as the sky is blue, truth is omnipotent, the present tense alone should be used.

IN the Roman language the infinitive was used in cases of the kind above mentioned. *Dixit* Deum verum et omnipotentem *esse*, is the manner in which a Roman would express himself. In English the infinitive does not well follow the verb said; but it would be infinitely more correct and elegant, in ordinary cases, to use the infinitive—"He *said* that God *is* just and omnipotent," is correct English; but it is more elegant to say, "he declared God *to be* just."

THIS criticism is deemed of the more importance as it is new—no English writer having noticed the fault; and the neglect of this principle is the most fruitful source of errors and confusion in our language. In the best British authors, we find many most egregious blunders of the kind above described. But the following sentence from Stewart's Elements

of the Philosophy of the Human Mind, affords an example of correctness in the particular mentioned, which will illustrate and confirm the principle here laid down. Phil. edit. p. 19.

"The strange mixture of fact and hypothesis, which the greater part of metaphysical inquiries *exhibit*, *had led* almost universally to a belief, that it *is* only a very faint and doubtful light, which human reason *can* ever expect to throw on this dark, but interesting, field of speculation."

This is a remarkable instance of precision in expressing the writer's ideas. The verb *exhibit* affirms a thing of metaphysical inquiries, which is *indefinite* as to *time*. It is true of most or all such inquiries without regard to time. The verb *had* affirms what effect this general state of such inquiries produced on men's minds, at a *certain anterior period*. Then come the verbs *is* and *can* in the subsequent member of the sentence, affirming things of indefinite time, or general existence, and therefore correctly placed in the present tense.

These are some of the material points to which I have taken the liberty to call your attention. To enter into a minute detail of particulars, would extend this letter to an improper length.

In this country, it is desirable that inquiries should be free and opinions unshackled. North America is destined to be the seat of a people more numerous, probably, than any nation now existing, with the same

vernacular language, unless we except some Asiatic nations. It would be little honorable to the founders of a great empire, to be hurried prematurely into errors and corruptions, by the mere force of authority. Yet what but the mere authority of names could lead Americans into such barbarisms in speech, as shuperstition, constitshution, keind, gyuide, adver'tise, if he do, and many others? Where shall we rest, if we are to be led from change to change, by the caprice of any foreign stage-player, who chooses to be singular, or any compiler of a dictionary or grammar, who sets his own opinions in opposition to the established practice of a nation?

It will be honorable to us as a nation, and more useful to our native tongue and to science, that we examin the grounds of all rules and changes before we adopt them, and reject all such as have not obvious propriety for their foundation, or utility for their object.

I am, Gentlemen,

Your obedient servant,

N. Webster, jun.

NEW-YORK,
January, 1798